

INVASIVE SPECIES FACT SHEET

Wintercreeper, climbing euonymus (*Euonymus fortunei*)

Description: Wintercreeper is an evergreen vine in the staff-tree family (Celastraceae). It forms a dense ground cover and can climb with the aid of aerial rootlets to heights of 20 feet. In Kentucky it is commonly found encircling trees and engulfing their trunks and lower limbs with its vines.

Its opposite leaves are elliptical, toothed, thick, glossy, and distinctly veined underneath. The leaf sizes and colors vary according to the numerous cultivars. Wintercreeper stems are woody and covered with minute warts.

The flowers are small, green, and grow inconspicuously in clusters at the ends of long stalks from May to August. The fruits are orange-red berries that are round and smooth, maturing from the middle to the end of the summer. Wintercreeper is distributed primarily through birds that eat the berries. The vine is often confused with bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*), which has alternate leaves. *Euonymus fortunei* can be distinguished from other *Euonymus* species because it is a vine rather than an erect shrub.



photo by: James Miller

Habitat: Wintercreeper was introduced from China as a ground cover in 1907 and is still a popular landscape plant due to its rapid growth and adaptability to various habitats. It tolerates most soil conditions and light levels from full sun to heavy shade. It competes well in floodplain, mesic, and dry-mesic forests; poor soils; heavy shade; and variable pH. Once established, it is aggressive and can spread into undisturbed forests, natural openings, or high quality riparian zones.

Distribution: Wintercreeper is scattered throughout the eastern U.S. In Kentucky it is widely distributed from McCracken to Bell Counties.

Threat: Wintercreeper is a serious threat to native plant species because of its adaptability and rapid spreading. It is capable of covering the ground and existing vegetation and eliminating native ground cover species in mesic and dry-mesic woods. Because it is an evergreen it can out-compete cool and warm season plants for space in the spring.

Control: For small populations or areas that are sensitive to herbicide, managers may pull the vine and the roots up by hand or with a digging tool, then remove the entire plant from the area. Any portion of the root that is not removed may resprout.

Another method for areas of light infestation is to cut the vines by hand after the last killing frost and spray each cut stem immediately with 20%-50% glyphosate (Roundup) or triclopyr (Garlon).

For larger infestations, a foliar herbicide spray is recommended in the spring prior to the emergence of spring wildflowers or in autumn after the first frost has killed most other vegetation. Apply a 2% solution of Roundup or Garlon to the leaves so they are wet but not dripping. Ambient air temperature should be above 65 degrees Fahrenheit for maximum effect.



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